



Prevention Research

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In recent years, research on strategies to prevent alcoholism and alcohol abuse has expanded greatly and shifted in emphasis. While studies 10 to 15 years ago focused almost exclusively on education-based prevention approaches, more recent research has evaluated a wider range of prevention measures, including laws and policies to reduce alcohol-related problems at local, State, and national levels.

As just a few examples, at the local level, recent studies have examined the effects of community-based programs that generate new policies to reduce underage drinking and alcohol-related traffic crashes. At the State and national levels, research has evaluated the effects of laws that set the minimum legal drinking age and the maximum blood alcohol concentration for drivers, as well as alcohol taxes. Although no longer the principal focus, research on educational approaches continues as well, with, for example, studies of programs that teach children to resist peer pressure to use alcohol, that challenge their misperceptions about the benefits and pervasiveness of alcohol use, and that train them to critically evaluate alcohol advertising.

Gauging the effectiveness of these and other prevention strategies can be complicated by a wide range of factors, such as cultural and economic variability in the study populations or activities at the community or State level that may influence the study outcomes. Using rigorous statistical methods, however, investigators are tackling the challenge of measuring the impact of critical intervening variables and accounting for extraneous factors. As a result, they are producing more robust results that can be generalized to populations beyond the study groups, thus offering new understandings of how programs and policies can reduce the toll of alcohol-related problems.

For example, as noted in the section “Reducing Alcohol-Impaired Driving,” thousands of young lives have been saved by increasing the legal drinking age to 21 and by passing “Zero Tolerance” laws that lower the maximum legal blood alcohol levels in young drivers to 0.02 percent. Findings from econometric studies also indicate that raising taxes on beer (the drug of choice among youth) could further reduce deaths caused by alcohol-impaired driving.

In addition, as described in the section “Community-Based Prevention Approaches,” school-based programs that are closely linked to other community activities and to parent involvement have been shown to reduce rates of alcohol use among middle school students. Other programs have successfully mobilized communities to lower the incidence of alcohol

sales to minors and to reduce the number of traffic crashes involving alcohol.

Prevention researchers have also pursued answers to the questions of whether alcohol advertising increases alcohol consumption and related problems and whether it predisposes children and adolescents to drink. In general—as noted in the section “Alcohol Advertising: What Are The Effects?”—research based on economic analyses shows that alcohol advertising seems to encourage people to switch brands or beverage preferences without increasing consumption rates. At the same time, survey studies of children and adolescents show links between alcohol advertising and favorable beliefs about alcohol, greater intentions to drink, and a greater likelihood of drinking. Although these results offer grounds for both reassurance and concern, the study methods used thus far are limited in their ability to generate firm conclusions about cause and effect.

As with other areas of scientific inquiry, prevention investigators are challenged both by the demands of the questions under study and by the constraints of the available research methods. As such, each of the sections in this chapter includes details not only about recent prevention strategies and results, but also about the strengths and limitations of the research methods employed.

Studies indicate that many prevention efforts can reduce harmful drinking and its consequences, while others have little or no effect. Having this knowledge is helping policy makers and program planners to make significant reductions in our Nation’s alcohol-related problems. Guidance will be further enhanced by future research that not only delineates which programs seem most effective overall, but also defines in detail which components of those programs are most critical to their success.